**Narrative style**

The novel is a woman’s autobiographical narrative that challenges the authority of Gilead, highlighting the significance of storytelling as an act of resistance against oppression.

Offred has three attributes that power-mad regimes cannot tolerate: an imagination, the power to communicate (through her story-telling) and hope. She insists on voicing her own point of view when the regime demands total silence.

Her narrative is the only way of bridging the gap between her isolated self and the world outside. It has become her means or survival, a reconstruction of events and a means of reconstructing her life; her story is a narrative of resistance challenging not only Gilead’s perspective but also the misrepresentations of her experience in the future.

We learn at the end that what we have read is a transcript of a number of cassette recordings that have been found at an archaeological site. It is a later reconstruction of Offred’s reconstruction told after her escape and Gilead has long since disappeared.

***First person discontinuous narration method***

Her narrative is in the first person discontinuous with frequent time shifts, short scenes and an unfinished ending. This shows her own hesitations and doubts. From the start the story shifts abruptly from one scene to another and from present time to past so that her present situation and her past history (revealed by flashbacks) are only gradually revealed. At the start there are few flashbacks and we, like the narrator, are trapped in the present time. It is in the ‘Night’ sections that the flashback technique is most obvious; they are Offred’s time out when she is free to dream and remember.

The narrative represents the complex way the memory works where the present moment is always pervaded by traces of the past (like a palimpsest): she judges the present through her memories of the past: ‘*You’ll have to forgive me. I’m a refugee from the past, and like other refugees I go over the customs and habits of being I’ve left or been forced to leave behind me*.’ (Ch 35)

***Fallible Narrator***

Offred can also be referred to as a fallible narrator. This is because she has a limited understanding of the society and can only show us about what she knows of it. Her understanding is limited because the only way in which she can get information is by eavesdropping on the Marthas and the odd conversation with Ofglen. As an interviewer of Atwood commented: “The curtain is drawn back slowly.” Atwood replied: “It would be cheating to show the reader more than the character has access to. Her information is limited. In fact, her lack of information is part of the nightmare.”

***Self-conscious narrator***

This is an unusual aspect of Offred’s narrative. She is continually drawing our attention to her storytelling process. She refers several times to that which she is relating being a story. Ch 7 ‘*I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it’s a story I’m telling, then I will have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it*.’ “*Here is what I’d like to tell*.” (Ch. 38) “*I wish this story were different… I’m sorry there is so much pain in this story. I’m sorry it’s in fragments…*” (Ch. 41) It is the only message she can hope to send to the outside world and she has to struggle to tell it. Her doing so emphasises her humanity and positions the reader firmly on her side.

She personifies her story as a victim of torture ‘*this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story*,’ in imagery which reflects the daily life in Gilead.

Offred also talks about events in the story as being reconstructed. “*This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction.*” (Ch. 21) “*I made that up. It didn’t happen that way…. It didn’t happen that way either. I’m not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate*.” This shows that she can’t trust anything in the regime; she isn’t sure of anything.

Offred often inserts questions into the narrative showing her unsure of the reality in which she lives as well as her memories. “*Mayday, Mayday, for pilots whose planes had been hit, and ships – was it ships too? – at sea.”* She breaks up the story with her wonderings, making her seem obviously human.

***Direct Address***

Offred often addresses the reader directly, “you”. She needs to believe that there is still someone out there with whom she can still communicate. “*A story is like a letter. Dear you, I’ll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say you, you, like an old love song. You can mean more than one.*

Her direct address makes her seem more credible in that she is talking directly to the audience; challenging them, perhaps. It contributes to her seeming real and human; less flat; and highlights differences between her society and ours.

“*But if you happen to be a man, sometime in the future, and you’ve made it this far, please remember: you will never be subjected to the temptation of feeling you must forgive, a man, as a woman*.” It draws the reader in and engenders empathy.

Other instances of her directly addressing the reader: ch41: ‘*But I keep going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you of if you escape, in the future or in Heaven or in prison or underground, some other place…By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you, I believe you’re there, I believe you into being. Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are.*’

***Telling stories of other women***

Throughout the text, we see Offred referring to other women who are or have been a part of her life. This shows her comparing her story to theirs: highlighting just how Offred copes with the régime. Repeatedly throughout the novel Offred quotes Aunt Lydia. This often happens when Offred has just been having a stream of imaginings and serves the purpose of giving the régime’s perspective on that which she was thinking about. She tells the stories of:

* her feminist mother (belongs in the past only)
* Moira’s story = one of female heroism, but unlike the mother’s it extends into the present when she becomes an inmate at the Rachel and Leah Centre, then Offred finds her again at Jezebel’s; hers is another unfinished story
* other Handmaids: all rebels or victims: her unnamed predecessor at the Commander’s house of whom all she knows is the scratched message in the cupboard (Ch 9) and scraps of information about how she hanged herself (Ch 29). She is Offred’s ghostly double.
* Janine – appears as willing victim at the Rachel and Leah Centre where she ends up in a bad state to her moment of triumph as Ofwarren at the Birth day attended by all the Handmaids (Ch 19 and 21) to her appearance as a madwoman after the Particicution holding a clump of bloodstained hair (Ch 43)
* the Commander’s Wife – flashbacks to her earlier career as a tv personality; like Offred, she is trapped by Gileadean regime. Offred has to disguise herself as Serena Joy when she wears a blue cloak to go to Jezebel’s and looks at her own face in SJ’s mirror to put on her make-up.

These give the audience the impression of very strong personalities having always existed around Offred. Her tales of Serena Joy show how easily our society could change from what it is now to something much more resembling Gilead – someone who is significant in Gilead is shown having had a past that people in our society have as their present.

***Contrasting Style of narration in Historical Notes***

Offred’s narration is written in the first person, as a stream of consciousness. However the Historical Notes are written as a recorded document of a university lecture; almost as a script. Offred relates her story with a dry humour while the Historical Notes show the professors making poor jokes to engage their audience. It is somewhat unsettling as the reader to find Offred suddenly being past tense; she is being talked about after her death. It’s also slightly ironic that after we begin to get close to Offred as a narrator and believe her story, we find that the authenticity of this story is doubted by historians. They also don’t find her as a person important, but concentrate on the Commander: a man. “*If we could identify the elusive ‘Commander’ we felt, at least some progress would have been made*.”

This shows the difference between a woman’s private narrative of memory and the grand impersonal narrative of history. Having heard O’s voice, we are unlikely to accept Professor Pieioxoto’s scholarly account which consigns her to the world of myth; we may not know her future but we do understand her present situation much better than the professor is willing to admit. Given his own sexist attitudes, we can assume that Offred’s story about patriarchal attitudes does not belong exclusively to the past but threatens the future as well. He is abusing Offred in the same way Gilead did: removing her authority over it and renaming it, like Gilead’s suppression of her identity. The Notes end on a question which invites us to enter the debate having heard two opposing perspectives on the story. Here the novel assumes the didactic tone typical of dystopian fiction as it becomes a warning to us of a future to be avoided.